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ABSTRACT

The paper suggests that schools often jump into gifted education programs impulsively without adequate planning and curriculum construction. It is asserted that gifted programing must adapt to its school and host community. The contributions of organizational development training in program development are noted. Curricular construction is three-phased: (1) development of program objectives from general to instructional goals; (2) selection or construction of appropriate curricula; and (3) evaluation. It is concluded that gifted/talented program demise is more frequently due to lack of organizational support or comprehensive evaluation strategy rather than to inappropriate or insufficient curriculum content. (CL)

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Abstract

Gifted/Talented Education: An Excercise in Measured Enthusiasm

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Constructing and implementing new gifted/talented (g/t) curricula are deceptively simple. Given today's resources and enthusiasm, perhaps any well-meaning educator can orchestrate ideas and personnel into an effective g/t program or provision. Experience indicates otherwise.

To survive, g/t curricula must adapt to their schools and to their host communities. Without support, g/t programs are functionally ostracized. Next, g/t curricula are likely to suffer without (1) targeted instructional goals; (2) goal-relevant curricula; and (3) effective evaluation.

All this if implemented with ample enthusiasm does promote g/t high-quality programs that last.

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Gifted/Talented Education: An Exercise in Measured Enthusiasm[1,2]

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Promoting gifted education, especially when a school has little to offer its ablest, is customarily applauded. Once planning commences, teachers, parents, and even gifted students anxiously anticipate promising developments.

Just imagine. Our stale old school programs will be renovated at last. More laboratories. More field trips. More individualized projects. More. And our gifted and talented students--this usually means the academic achievers--will be challenged at last. Effective gifted education programs abound, and major school systems have operated them for years (see Tannenbaum, 1983, pp. 2-48). Any school has much to model.

Like kids in a candy store, hungry educators, anxious parents, and excited students salivate as they stand drooling over someone else's effective gifted program. Just look at their budget! Let's add a gifted education coordinator like they have. Let's build a modern science laboratory. Just evoking the words, "gifted education," magicelly thrusts some into the educational vanguard.

Motives for gifted programs, of course, are not always positive and pure. Initial pushes are not always gentle, and they do not always originate from well-meaning teachers of bored, bright students. Sometimes, the educational candy

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is bittersweet. Disgruntled parents can pound on the school board door. They want more for their children--more achievement, more challenge, more opportunites. They want it from their schools, and their enthusiasm often turns to war. Parents of the gifted know about money spent on other types of exceptional children like the behaviorally impaired. Our school has to do something for us!

Although some parents and educators speak eloquently about our nation's thirst for leaders, scientists, and a healthy intelligentsia, hidden behind some of this eloquence is a drive for status and counter-identification with their children. Many may not be as interested in restoring the nation's brain trust as they are in polishing their own parental egos. Being a parent of a gifted child does have its rewards--and its stresses.

To review, schools often jump into gifted education impulsively. Enthusiasm mounts as more and more are actively involved in a developing project. Before long, curriculum construction begins.

Early planning phases bubble excitedly. Initial enthusiasm and dedication is highest, but eventual program success, of course, depends on how energy is invested over long periods of planning and implementation. Too frequently, early enthusiasm wanes as productive work commences. Early enthusiasm provides initial and essential energy for planned and effective curriculum construction.

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But cheering is not the same as methodically identifying goals, selecting curricula, implementing plans, measuring performance, and making it all politically fit the community and school. As professionals, let us support wisely-invested enthusiasm and not school wars or program impulsiveness.

Most often, unfortunately, curricular groups do impulsively string together activities that fit their expectations of gifted/talented (g/t) curricula. And all this is done in a pressing atmosphere of cost-effectiveness. Little time is invested--some say wasted--exhaustively searching for program options, building school harmony, and defining evaluation strategies. It is easier to construct a program that looks like gifted/talented education. The real instructional prize, of course, is to build something that lasts and that reliably delivers its intended effects.

Surviving Organizationally

G/t school curricula are unique, for their existence is often not state mandated. G/t education in many American schools is supported only by professional and public sentiment and not through federal grants, legal mandates, or tradition.

G/t programs start because influential and energetic school groups or individuals realize that the needs of exceptional children are not being met. The fact that a g/t

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program is maintained is a tribute to its initiators and to the professional wisdom of a host school district. Insightful, energetic individuals build g/t programs, and healthy school organizations encourage and sustain them. Quite surprisingly, effective g/t programs have bloomed and prospered in even malfunctining schools. G/t programming does not need an ideal organizational climate, but it helps.

Conoley and Conoley (1982) list characteristics of healthy school organizations. Problem solving styles, for one, distinguish robust organizational functioning:

> Does the system avoid confronting problems, over-discuss issues, or squarely face problems and develop action plans? What decision making style is used . . . ? (p. 126)

Like individuals (see Davis, 1983), quality organizations solve problems with generous measures of divergent creativity, resourcefulness, openness, and flexibility. As with individuals, organizational problem solving can be improved through organizational training.

Since the mid-1960's, a few schools have employed organizational development (OD) training (Fullan, Miles, & Taylor, 1980). OD encourages teams of personnel to enhance their problem solving attitudes and behavior. According to Fullan et al., OD takes time, usually two years for maximal benefit. OD is carefully planned, focuses on group dynamics, progresses with external change agents, and is

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directed by valid performance data. According to the Fullan et al. review, about one-half of the OD projects in schools fail.

OD-trained organizations encourage social structures receptive to innovation (e.g., new curricula), more facilitative relations between teachers and students, creativity, staff responsiveness, shared management functions, and efficient communication.

Few schools implement OD (see Gottfredson, 1984). OD is expensive, time consuming, and requires sustained commitment. It is always easier to do nothing if your school is functioning, and that is what most schools do.

> The health of an organization, regardless of its status, cannot be ignored. Organizational health is pervasively evident.
>
> . . . bureaucracies are, in the final analyses, the envelope and the instrument within which and by means of which the operations that they are set up to perform are carried out. (See Inbar, 1979, p. 163)

In his insighful study, Routine Decision-Making, Michael Inbar (1979) examines everyday organizational problem solving. Organizations grapple with routine daily problems differently than they confront substantial conundrums which occur more rarely. Major and unique problems evoke more creative openness, deliberation, and

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scientific thoroughness. Routine decision making, perhaps like curriculum questions for schools, promotes habitual, limited, and traditional responses.

> To summarize, neither the analytic nor the cybernetic model are held to always be appropriate . . . . man can only satifice and not maximize, attend to a few cues at one time, cannot order preferences well, and engage in analytic problem solving only as a last resort, and even then revert to his habitual model of decision-making at the first opportunity . . . (see Inbar, 1979, p. 115).

Untrained organizations force habitual, uncreative thinking across problems and issues unless deliberately forced to do otherwise.

Gottfredson's (1984) OD model, the Program Development Evaluation method, includes "force field" analysis. Gottfredson, like Kurt Lewin (1951), is sensitive to the social and psychological environment surrounding an organizational decision or action. For g/t curricula, force field analyses encompass teachers, administrators, participating and non-participating students, and the school community.

Gottfredson (1984) writes:

> An examination or analysis of an organization's force field, especially one that focuses on the

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> resources available and the obstacles to action, is frequently useful for four reasons: (a) . . . the nature of these perceptions becomes explicit and open to scrutiny, revision, supplementation, and test; (b) a complete account of obstacles and resources decreases the likelihood that pitfalls or potentials will be overlooked in the development of a project; (c) using knowledge of the influences in the project's environment helps to capitalize on opportunities or arrangements that go beyond the resources under a project's direct control; and (d) alternative strategies to implement any intervention can be created and assessed in the context of the force field. (p. 1105)

Programmers aware of force field factors, especially the health and problem solving sophistication of their school organizations, will enhance their effectiveness. G/t enthusiasts, dismissing dissenters as uninformed or even ignorant, underestimate powerful allies. Prior awareness of the force field is important for successful g/t programming. Actual daily operation of a program, however, requires an elaborate orchestration of endless particulars.

An Instructional Triad

Curricular construction is three-phased. To begin, one defines g/t program objectives from general to instructional

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goals (see Alexander & Muia, 1983, pp. 65-126). School personnel and student participants should know where they are headed and why. What is the desired terminal behavior? How is it to be assessed? Under what conditions?

Goal clarification invites preparatory activities: student assets/needs assessment; surveys of teacher and parental attitudes; an inventory of school and community personnel and material resources; and identification. These are the traditional components of effective instructional design (Mager, 1962).

Schools hunting g/t curricula often visit other schools with operating programs. This is an exciting way to see what your colleagues are doing. Too often, visitors look only for program activities. Model schools, especially ones with g/t track records, are also excellent sources for instructional goals.

The second phase of instructional design is the selection or construction of appropriate curricula. The search for curricula can begin variously. Parents and educators could form reading groups to examine existing enrichment and acceleration models (see Tannenbaum, 1983, pp. 374-439). Very objective, very rational, very abstract but seldom employed. Most start with details and operating programs with a taste for application, not with abstract models.

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Given only a few dozen models, there are thousands of gifted courses, programs, and provisions (i.e., units of educational experience smaller than courses). Ask any group of teachers, someone will know someone who knows. In fact, there is usually a credible example close enough for a visit.

Once a program is located, a professional field trip is organized, and a bus load of observers is soon on its way. This looks like what we want! Energized by a panorama of motives, many buy impulsively what glitters. The bus trip home is pedagogical pandemonium. Impulsive educational consumers chatter busily about what they need and what they will do. Little patience remains for goal clarification. We see what we want! Let's do it!

The instructional triad's third phase is evaluation. Empirical evaluation puts numbers on behavior, comparing the same students before and after program participation, or, for a more powerful test, comparing controls with experimentals. Evaluation makes curriculum construction circular, dynamic, and continuous. Did the program arrive at the intended goals? Was the curriculum effective?

Given reasonably priced computer hardware and understandable software, every school can now store sufficiently large performance databases to manage its programs empirically. Schooling becomes as much a science as an art. Although performance gains, so often just

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assumed, can often be confirmed numerically, they rarely are in g/t programming.

It is disgraceful how little schools assess their effectiveness quantitatively. Evans (1974) found that fewer than 10% of all OD programs are ever evaluated, and most of these evaluation efforts are poorly designed. Too many g/t programs typically follow this non-evaluated tradition.

What Really Happens

Educational programs for the gifted are forged in boiling social cauldrons and not in quiet contemplation. Look at the recipe: anxious parents, budget-constrained administrators, hassled and fatigued teachers. For many, there is little apparent value in delaying.

Too many schools entering g/t education short-circuit goal clarification and grab expeditiously what looks good. Impulse prevails under the guise of professional judgment.

Unfortunately, quickly concocted curricula seldom weather. Sufficient planning requires (1) that we work well organizationally; (2) that we search for curricular options; and (3) that we evaluate our programs empirically and judgmentally. All this necessitates more than applauded enthusiasm. Carefully invested energy is needed to sustain any g/t curriculum committee in building an empirically defensible program that fits.

G/t enthusiasts should be attentive to all the components in the life cycle of their programs: how to

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begin, how to maintain a curriculum, and why so many programs are eventually discontined. The last phase, program demise, is rarely addressed.

It is my experience that g/t program demise is infrequently due to inappropriate or insufficient curriculum content. Programs die because they lack clear and firm organizational support or because they are not supported by a comprehensive evaluation strategy.

Schools can and do construct effective g/t programs. However, success follows careful planning, energetic implementation, and comprehensive evaluation. Successful g/t programs are not accidental.

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Footnote

[1] Paper presented at the Midstates Gifted and Talented Conference, Dodge City, KS, April 19, 1985.

[2] Professor Geroge Griffith's insightful editorial commentary is fully appreciated.

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